

You're Gonna Burn (Burn to the Wick) by osaki_nana_707

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Summary:

"Billy?"

"Max."

"Hey..."

There's a beat of silence on the other line. Billy's about to ask her what the hell she wants when she finally pipes up and tells him.

"I'm at the airport in Indianapolis. Can you come pick me up?"

Or, Max needs a break.

You're Gonna Burn (Burn to the Wick)

Author's Note:

Please read the other stories before this one or things may not make sense. Also, apologies for this one taking so long, hopefully the length of it will more than make up for it lol

You're Gonna Burn (Burn to the Wick)

Steve's house is quiet.

It's got sturdier walls than Billy's, and it's further from the main roads. It's not humongous, but compared to the little house Billy's been living in, it might as well be the Taj Mahal. It doesn't feel empty though, at least not to Billy, since Steve clutters his walls with pictures and bookshelves and decorations. He has furniture that matches with a few odd pieces that don't, likely things he didn't get rid of in the move or maybe just stuff he's too attached to. Steve seems like the type to get attached to pieces of furniture, Billy thinks. He's soft like that.

The house is *clean* too, spotless really. It makes Billy kind of feel like a slob when he hauls Steve through the front door at approximately 1:30 AM. Steve is barely conscious when they get there, slurring his words as he mumbles something about demogorgans and little girls with magic powers. Billy's no longer sure how much of that is real and how much of it is Steve's imagination. He can't really trust it to just be drunken ramblings now.

Billy knows Steve isn't bullshitting him about the monsters. He's not sure why. He just knows.

He gets Steve into bed, gets his shoes off, gets him tucked in. Steve blinks crookedly up at him and then just dozes right back off, so Billy goes back out to the car and gets Katie.

He doesn't *have* to stay, but...

Steve doesn't want to be alone in his house.

He puts Katie in Hannah's bed, since it's not currently occupied, kisses her forehead. She never stirs for even a moment.

From there he goes back to Steve's room, finds he's rolled over so he's facedown in the bed, arm hanging off the side, knee poking out from under the covers Billy tucked him into, and he's snoring and drooling. It's not what most would find an attractive sight, Billy thinks, but the longing desire to crawl into bed next to him is there all the same.

He doesn't.

He never does anything that he should do.

He really hasn't changed at all, he thinks.

Billy goes downstairs and settles on the sofa, draping himself with an afghan that hangs over the back of the couch. It's not easy to fall asleep though with the new information he has swirling around in his head.

He'd known Steve had seen something awful, that everyone that had been in the Byers' house that day had seen *something* , but... it's a little more than he was prepared for, knowing there are real, actual monsters out there. He can't really picture them from Steve's description. He's not sure he ever wants to know what they look like though, for fear they might creep into his own nightmares. His dreams are shitty enough as it is.

Real-fucking-monsters. Max was fighting monsters with her stupid friends when they were just fucking *kids* , and Billy had no fucking idea. He's not mad at them for keeping it from him-- there's no point in that and besides, they managed to handle it on their own, obviously. It's just a reminder that he was so far up his own ass back then that he had *no idea* . He doesn't know where they've come from. All Steve said was it was some other dimension. That means he doesn't know if they can come back or not, doesn't know if there are

some still out there that could get Katie, could get Hannah, could get Steve...

His stomach rolls. Sweat breaks out on his forehead. He squeezes his hands into fists to keep them from shaking at the thought. He still can't picture them, and suddenly, somehow, that's worse. These creatures he can't see could be lurking out there in the darkness, ready to destroy what little bit he's managed to build. Everything that he loves.

...and he loves Steve. He knows that. He was going to tell him, but he didn't.

He never does anything that he should do.

He rolls over on his side, stares at the time on the VCR. It's not set, so it just says that it's midnight. The clock tick-tocking on the wall above the television set says it's almost two.

He thinks about Steve up there in his bed. He thinks about the big empty space on the other side of him. He thinks about the crappy pull-out bed he has back at Max's house.

He thinks about how that's not home, how it's not lived in so much as it is occupied, how Billy's never *lived* in a space, how he's only *occupied* space, how-- fuck--

He closes his eyes. He needs to *stop* thinking and get some sleep because he has to go to work in the morning, and Hopper's already suspicious about what's going on in Billy's head as it is. He doesn't need to have his nerves raw if Hopper starts asking questions. He's really not sure he can handle that after everything that's already been flayed open tonight.

Maybe that's why Billy didn't say anything, he thinks. (He's still thinking, despite himself).

It's all too much for one person to bear. This sinking feeling in Billy's stomach, that drenching, ice cold *fear* has been something Steve's been dealing with for ten goddamned years. Ten years feeling scared, feeling guilty. Even with his monsters buried.

Billy laughs, but it catches in his throat.

They really are cut from the same cloth.

Steve's a lot tougher than Billy though. Billy's not sure he would have ended up half as well-adjusted as Steve is, given the circumstance.

Fuck.

He needs to sleep.

He wants to sleep.

Eventually, he does.

--

It's about all the sleep he manages for the next few weeks.

Steve doesn't say anything to him, at least not with words, but every time Billy comes to pick up Katie they share silent conversations, never confirming with each other whether the translation is right. Billy's pretty sure Steve remembers telling Billy about the monsters, and he's pretty sure Steve knows he remembers it too. He's just too afraid to bring it up, it seems, and Billy honestly can't really blame him.

Still, it's hard to deal with, and Billy sucks at it, so he does the only thing a coward like him can do.

He can't fight, so he retreats.

Suddenly, they're right back at the start, with Billy honking his car horn out in the street to signal Katie it's time to go.

Steve doesn't even stand around and wait for Billy's impatience to bring him to the door. He lets her go without a word. It shouldn't hurt. It does.

Steve still glances at him through the part in the curtains though, and Billy stares back at him through the Camaro's window.

He tells himself not to let it get to him.

It does.

--

It's been about a month, and Billy's been sleeping like shit, his dreams full of Steve and flower-faced monsters. He doesn't keep the lights on like some sort of pussy, but he has been doing a perimeter of the house every night before he goes to bed to not-sleep. He wants to talk to Steve-- he doesn't feel like he's used his voice in the entire thirty days. His throat feels as raw as the skin around the fingernails he's been biting for reasons other than cigarettes.

God , he wants a cigarette.

--Dad. *Dad* ."

Billy jolts and looks at Katie who is staring at him over her plate of eggs and toast.

"What?" he asks.

"I said, something's wrong with Harrington."

Billy's stomach sinks. "What do you mean?"

"He's all sad all the time. Like you." Katie's looking at her food now, pushing her eggs towards the center of the plate with her fork. "It makes Hannah sad. She cried yesterday at recess."

Billy's lips part, but he doesn't manage to come up with anything to say. She says *like you* so casually, like being sad is just a part of him.

"*Dad* ," she stresses again, her little eyebrows meeting on her forehead because he's still not paying attention.

"What do you want me to do about that, Katie?" he asks.

"He's your friend, isn't he?"

Billy's not sure if they are friends anymore. He's not sure if it's better

that way.

He can't talk to her about that though, so he says, "Yeah."

"So fix it," she says as if it's obvious. Billy can't tell her that he can't fix the fact that monsters exist any better than he can fix the fact that he's in love with him, and he *can't be*. He can't fix the fact that being in love is still even scarier than the monsters because he at least hasn't borne witness to these monsters and can pretend they don't exist. His whole life is a fucking *nightmare* right now and--

He's chewing on his fingers again. It's getting to be so common Katie doesn't even curse when he does it anymore.

Katie keeps staring at him expectantly, so he cuts his eyes away and mumbles, "Yeah, I'll get right on that." He won't, but she seems satisfied at least.

"Good," she says, "so um. Hannah and me got asked to come to Julie's sleepover this weekend, and I dunno. Julie's okay, I guess. She's got a pool and a treehouse, so it'd be super fun. Can I go? Harrington can drop me off. I can just take my bathing suit with me to school."

Billy doesn't really want to be alone with his thoughts or to have Katie out of his sight, so he's kind of grateful he doesn't get the chance to answer before the phone is ringing from the living room. He makes his great escape, thinks maybe it's Hopper with something work-related, or, only as he picks up the receiver, *Steve*, because he's the only other person that has his number, but...

"Billy?"

"Max."

"Hey..."

There's a beat of silence on the other line. Billy's about to ask her what the hell she wants when she finally pipes up and tells him.

"I'm at the airport in Indianapolis. Can you come pick me up?"

The beat of silence on the line is from him this time.

“Screw it,” she says, and he can sense her going to hang up.

“Wait,” he says, and the line doesn’t go dead so apparently she does. “I... gotta call work. It’s a drive. It’ll probably be a couple hours at least. What are you doing in Indianapolis?”

“I’m out of quarters, I can’t stay on the line. I’ll see you when you get here.”

She hangs up, slamming the phone into the cradle. Billy listens to the dead tone a lot longer than he should before he dials Hopper’s office.

--

Billy gets Hopper’s permission to take the day off, gets Katie to school, and gets to Indianapolis in a few hours. It’s hot as summer keeps crawling its way into the state, and Billy’s sweating. The air conditioner has gone out in the Camaro, so he’s had his windows down the whole damn drive, but it’s not helping much. If anything, the heat is just agitating him, making him wonder why the fuck he’s even making the drive, why he told her he’d come when all they’ve ever done is piss each other off. Why the fuck did she call *him* ? Why the fuck is she even *here* ?

Maybe he’s just too curious, or maybe he’s just sure if he spends another minute in Hawkins he’ll rip his hair out. Hell, maybe he just needs to redirect his frustrations in the direction of someone else, and Max has always been that person, and she basically presented herself as available to do so.

Fuck.

He pulls up outside the sliding doors by baggage claim, and he thinks very hard about turning around and going back home without ever seeking her out, but before he can make that choice, the door to the backseat is opening and a suitcase is being thrown in and then Max is in the passenger seat.

She is... different.

It's only been about a month since he's seen her, but in that month she's gotten her nose pierced. She's got on ripped jeans and a pair of Doc Martens and a t-shirt and it's all fucking *black* . In this *heat* .

"Hey," she says casually, tossing her feet up on the dash with a cigarette between her lips. It smells good. Familiar. It's his brand.

"...Okay," he says, staring at her. "What the fuck."

She looks at him, holds out an oversized blueberry muffin. "Got this for you."

He keeps staring at her.

"Just go," she says. "You're holding up the line."

It's not that busy here as far as he can tell-- people aren't clamoring to come to Indianapolis on a Friday mid-morning. He puts the car in drive and pulls out anyway. They're silent for most of the drive through the city. Max eats the muffin, thumping her cigarette butt out the window.

"I'm kinda surprised you showed up," she says, talking with her mouth full. Billy is still watching her from the corner of his eye when he's not looking at the road. She has the increasingly familiar look of someone who hasn't slept. There are dark circles under her eyes, hastily and shoddily camouflaged with way too much eyeliner. Her clothes have the faint scent of booze on them.

"Yeah, I'm kind of surprised I showed up too," Billy says slowly. He doesn't like how unsettled he feels. He shouldn't even care. He shouldn't even be here. "What the hell are you doing here, Max?"

"Needed a break."

"You just left Hawkins a month ago."

"I needed a break," she says again, slightly more stern, like that's going to be the end of it.

"So you blow a shitload of money to fly back here on the off chance I would pick you up? I could've just said no. I had to work today,

y'know--"

" *Billy* ."

She's never said his name like that before. It's on the edge of desperate, her jaw clenched defiantly. When he glances over at her, her eyes are on the dashboard. She's crushed what's left of the muffin in her hands.

"Right," Billy says, then reaches over and plucks one of the cigarettes from the pack in her shirt pocket, waves it at her until she fishes out a lighter from her jeans and lights it for him, and then he takes a gloriously long drag.

"Later then," he says with an exhale of smoke and passes it back to her.

She tosses the ruined remains of the muffin out the window and then takes the cigarette and takes a pull.

"When'd you start smoking?" Billy asks.

"What are you, my mom?"

Billy waits.

She eventually caves. "About two and a half hours ago."

"You smoke like an old pro," he snorts.

"I learned it by watching you."

"If that's supposed to insult me, it's not working."

"I thought you quit."

"I won't tell if you won't."

The smoke feels good in his lungs. It burns just enough to take the edge off, just like it did on the back step at the Byers' house. He thinks of Will, delicate and knobby-kneed, letting the nicotine dull his edges too. He looks at Max.

Damaged , he thinks.

Max unbuckles her seatbelt and half-drapes herself into the backseat, digging in her suitcase until she produces some cassettes and pops one in. It's Heart. He'd know the baseline of "Barracuda" anywhere.

"This song really kills in bars," she says. "People get so fucking excited."

"You're going to watch bands play in bars now?"

"I'm with the band."

He raises both of his eyebrows. "You're in a band." He sounds skeptical.

She puffs up a little. "Don't act so fucking surprised. You think I can't be in a band?"

"I think you couldn't get a band together in a couple of weeks and start performing immediately, no," he says flatly.

"Well- we... we weren't the band playing. We were just... observing. We're still rehearsing right now. But we're really good, okay?"

He could throw out a barb in her direction. It'd be easier than breathing. He looks at her again, and he thinks of her at thirteen with freckles. Thinks of flower-faced monsters shrieking in the darkness.

"I don't doubt it," he says. "Teachers like that extra-curricular shit anyway, don't they?"

She stiffens, and he realizes he's taken a shot at her without even aiming.

"Wouldn't know," she says, turning her whole body towards the window so she doesn't have to look him in the face. "I dropped out when I got home."

For a moment or two, only Ann Wilson's soaring voice fills the space between them.

Max is ashamed of herself, curling closer, making herself smaller. He doesn't think it has anything to do with *his* feelings on the subject though.

"I was never... right for that kind of shit," she says softly. It's a miracle he can hear her over the music. "I never felt like I... belonged. I kept trying to find ways to make myself fit, but I just... didn't."

He squeezes the steering wheel. He says nothing.

Fuck.

"I came back to Hawkins for Spring Break, and... I dunno... It just cleared my head a little. I liked singing, y'know, but like... it was never something I thought I was any good at, never something I thought about doing for real... but then you said I was amazing... and if you could say something like that, then maybe it was true. I couldn't stop thinking about it. It was the first time I'd really felt... *happy* doing something in... a really long time."

Fuck .

"The whole flight home, all I could think about was how I wanted to feel like that again, and so when I got home, me and Lucas went out to like... a bar. And there was this guy there on the piano, and I sang with him, and... the crowd liked me. It felt... I can't... really describe it, but... I dunno. An epiphany, I guess."

"So you... dropped out of school to form a band? Pretty punk rock of you." The smile on his face feels softer, more like one he reserves for Katie. For Steve.

"Yeah, well, turns out my dad's more of the uhh... Jimmy Buffett variety."

Billy laughs. "Oh, yeah? Dear ol' dad didn't like that?"

He sees the sadness crawl up through her, the way her legs slide off the dashboard like they're suddenly too heavy to hold up, the way her hair falls over the droop of her shoulder to hide her face even further. Billy feels the heavy weight of regret settle heavy in his

stomach. Considering all the things in his life he's had to be sorry for, he'd thought he'd be used to this feeling by now. He isn't.

"Contrary to what you might think, dear ol' dad didn't like a lot of things about me."

Her arms fold over her chest. Her legs come up into the seat with her. She taps ash out the open window. "I think he only let me stay with him and paid for my schooling to save face and look like a good dad. He used to like me, or... I thought he did. Maybe when I showed up I just... wasn't what he expected. Maybe his new wife changed him. Maybe I was just seeing him how he really was."

She takes another puff and hands the cigarette back. Their fingers barely brush against each others'.

"He expected me to be a certain way," she explains, and it feels terribly familiar. Familiarly terrible. "He thought that because I was older, I needed to stop 'acting like a boy' and develop interests more suitable for a 'pretty girl like me'. I spent so long in the bathroom that night talking myself out of shaving my head out of spite. I was so desperate to make him happy because he was all I had, and I just... lost myself."

Billy's eyes burn. He keeps staring at the road.

"...but then Lucas comes out to California too. He could've gone to school back here with Dustin, or like... gone to New York with Will and Mike. He's so smart, he could've done anything, but he followed me. He flies through school like it's not even an effort and gets an engineering degree while I'm still trying to decide who the fuck I even am, and he's still there. He doesn't... He doesn't leave. It doesn't make any sense, y'know? We fight and break up all the time, but he never leaves. It's always me. I'm always the one. Why am I always the one?"

She's not really talking to him anymore, he realizes. He passes the cigarette.

"Later," he says quietly. "You can talk about it later."

She looks up at him. She's got streaks of eyeliner running down her cheeks. "Yeah. Okay."

For good measure, he hands off his sunglasses. She wears them the entire drive back to Hawkins.

--

When they get back to Hawkins, Billy starts making something to eat. He knows it won't be long before it's time to pick up Katie from school, but Steve is there to do that. She'll be okay.

Max is less okay, Billy thinks. She's not showing her cracks anymore, has settled into the comfortable numbness that he's gotten so familiar with in his own life. Her expression is stony, almost careless, but he knows. He just does.

He's boiling noodles. He thinks spaghetti will feed everyone. Max is sitting at the kitchen table, staring blankly out the patio doors, chin settled on her palm. She's got a portable cassette player on the table, her headphones on, but Billy knows it's not actually playing.

"So," he says, not looking at her, "you gonna talk?"

She pulls the headphones off, huffing. "What's there to talk about?"

As if she hadn't nearly had a breakdown in his car. He snorts. "I can think of a few things."

She keeps staring out the glass doors. "I'm fine."

"That's not what I asked," he says, stepping away from the noodles to let them cook. He leans his hip against the counter, hands in his pockets, the perfect picture of casual. If she can pretend, he can too. "Look, I'm not fucking stupid, alright? You're sitting at my kitchen table in Hawkins on a random fucking Friday, Maxine."

"It's technically *my* kitchen table."

"You came to me. You could've called Dustin. Or Joyce. You could have called your mom. You called me."

She stares at him, her lips parting slightly. "Who's to say I didn't call them? They were busy."

"Busy not getting your phone call because Dustin would drop everything to help you and was closer to boot. Joyce would help you too."

"They might have told Lucas."

It's not said like a confession, but it is one.

It isn't a long sentence, but it says everything it needs to.

"So, you're running from Lucas," he says. "You left again, but this time for real. You ran as far as you could, and you called me because you figured he wouldn't expect it."

She frowns. She says nothing. She doesn't have to.

He sighs. He's too tired for someone else's romance issues. He's got enough issues with his own love life as it is.

"Didn't take you for a coward, Maxine," he says, and it's cruel, but he doesn't have the energy to be nice. Even if he did, she wouldn't trust it, so at least this cuts out the bullshit.

"I'm not a coward," she seethes. All of the easy numbness is sliding off of her, and all Billy can think is *good*. He hates that shit. He hates how it looks. He hates how it feels. He has to fight his fire every day of his goddamn life, but at least it's better than the fucking ice.

"Why did you bail out on him this time?"

"I didn't bail on anyone. I just need a *break*."

"And your dad was cool with that? Giving you the money to fly back here after just a month of being back?"

"My dad's not even *speaking* to me since I dropped out!" she shouts, face ruddy.

"Where you been living then?"

Billy is calm. It's weird, being on the other side of this fire. He wonders if he's the one who planted that rage in Max. He knows he's the one who planted it in Katie. It's not something he's proud of.

"With... with Lucas," she says, slightly flustered.

"Until you left," Billy says. "With his money, I'm guessing. Didn't take you for a thief either."

There it is, welling in her eyes. The familiar contempt, the fear that he used to evoke in her. It's not directed at him this time though. "You don't *understand*," she says, voice wobbling traitorously as she tries to hold onto the anger because the anger is so much easier than the sadness. He understands it. He wonders if that's why Max called him.

He would understand all of the hate turned inward. How it festers and flares up and consumes. Maybe she thought he could help her stop it. He kind of wishes he could. He still hasn't figured it out.

He thinks maybe he's starting too though... and it starts with this. "So," he says, keeping his voice level, watching her, his blue eyes into hers. "Explain it to me, and I'll understand."

She breaks open like she did in the car. It's less subtle this time.

"Why should I tell you?" she asks, her voice wracked with sobs she is forcing down to no avail.

"Because I'm the only one here," he says softly. "I'm all you got right now."

She blinks a few times, tears getting stuck in her lashes. "Fuck!" she shouts, shoving her tape player off the table so that it clatters to the floor. It's not enough, but it's all she has.

"Yeah," he says, going back to the stove. The noodles aren't done yet, but maybe he can make a sauce from scratch. He's never done it before, but it can't be that hard. It would at least give him something to do with his hands. "I'd be disappointed if it was me too, but it's me, so..."

She just sits at the table and cries for a while. He can hear her sniffs and little whimpers. He searches the fridge for stuff to make a sauce with, but he doesn't actually have anything. He supposes he'll have to go with the canned shit after all.

"If it helps," he says after a bit, "I already know some of your secret shit, so you don't have to feel like you gotta keep shit from me."

"What secret shit?"

Billy keeps his head in the fridge rather than look at her. "I know about the monsters."

Her crying stops. The air stagnates.

He can hear the gears turning in her head, trying to decide whether to deny it or not. She eventually chooses not to. "Who told you about that?"

"Steve," he says, closing the fridge and going to the pantry, fetching a jar of sauce and making sure it's not expired. "He was drunk. I found him on the side of the road hunting for monsters with a baseball bat full'a nails."

"Oh, God," she says, dropping her forehead into her hand.

"It's alright. I got him home safely."

"Why did he tell you? We weren't supposed to tell anyone--"

"He was scared."

The air grows quiet again. Billy stands there with the jar in one hand, honesty in the other. She can't look away from his face.

"He was scared," he repeats. "He's still scared. I... I'm..."

I'm scared too .

She wipes her cheek with the heel of her hand. "Lucas was gonna ask me to marry him. I... I found the ring in his sock drawer. He doesn't know I know. I just... freaked out."

“So you bailed.”

“Yeah.”

Her hair falls over her shoulder, hiding her face again.

“I guess I thought... you were the only one who wouldn’t care. You ran off when you graduated. Even though I hated you, I... I understood. I know living in that house was fucking hell for you, even more than me.”

“You don’t know shit about it,” Billy says, but it doesn’t have the heat in it he wishes it did.

“It wasn’t that big of a house, Billy. You think I didn’t hear it when he yelled at you? You think I never saw the bruises?”

He shrugs a shoulder. Suddenly he’s having just as hard a time meeting her gaze.

“I should’ve said something,” she says. “I should’ve... done something. And I didn’t.”

“There wasn’t anything you could’ve done, Max. It’s fine. It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter, and I *could* have. I just didn’t because I... I hated you so much... and I was wrong.”

A corner of his mouth turns up, humorless. “No, you weren’t. I was a huge dick. You had every right to hate me.”

“...Okay. That’s fair, but... you still didn’t deserve... all that. Especially if it’s the reason why you were the way you were.”

Billy doesn’t know if it is or if it isn’t. He’d never been without it while growing up, and he’s sure it at least plays some part, but... He doesn’t want to make excuses, or make his own fire someone else’s responsibility. It’s his job to put it out now so that he can show Katie how to do the same. Some people would probably call that *maturity*, maybe, but he doesn’t think that’s quite right. He’s still the same underneath all his efforts, he thinks. He hasn’t changed at all, he

thinks.

“You’re different than you were back then,” Max says.

It kind of feels like he’s been punched in the gut.

“You are,” she says, getting up. He doesn’t see the movement, but he hears the chair move, hears her approach in her boots. “You changed when Katie was born. I know it wasn’t a magic light switch that you turned on though. You made an effort because you cared about something besides yourself.”

Billy laughs. It’s a sound that rattles in his chest, that physically *aches* . “I have... never cared about myself, Maxine. Why do you think I filled my lungs with tar, binge drank, fucked around with people who were no good? Katie is a product of my slow-motion suicide. I’m a fucking nightmare, but I’m all she’s got so I tried to be... less of that. More of what a dad should be. More of what I wanted. Don’t they always say ‘be the change you wish to see in the world’ or whatever? I was just doing that.”

“I feel like you kind of just reworded what I said,” she says, offering a small smile. Her eyes are still wet. He doesn’t know if they’re old tears or new.

He rolls his eyes, dismissing any affection she’s offering. “Whatever. We weren’t talking about me. We were talking about you. I mentioned the monsters because... that’s why I know you’re not a coward. You’ve never run from anything in your fucking life, but *marriage* is what scares you?”

“I’m not *scared* ,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest. “That’s not what it is at all.”

“Then why did you run?”

“Because, I-- I...” She deflates. “I’m... trying to make a point... I guess.”

“The point being?”

Her lips thin.

Billy shrugs. He checks the noodles. They're almost cooked. "Look, if you don't wanna tell me, don't fucking tell me. I've got enough shit going on in my life, I don't need yours. All I'm saying is, you called me for a reason, and maybe somewhere deep down you thought I'd get it or that I could help, and fuck knows I... I owe you a lot of fucking favors for the way I acted back then, so... It's whatever. Do what you want."

She goes back to the table and picks up her cassette player. He thinks for a minute she's not actually going to tell him, but then she says, "I want him to realize he's making a mistake before he makes it. I'm just... trying to protect him."

Billy frowns. "What the fuck does that even mean, Max?"

She loops her headphones around her neck. She fiddles with the buttons, rewinding the tape. "Considering how smart he is, he's really fucking stupid, okay? He has to figure out that he's wasting his time choosing me over and over again..."

Billy waits for her to go on, but she doesn't. Eventually she glances at him, and he just nods towards the sink where the strainer is sitting. She silently holds it for him while he pours the noodles into it, draining the water. He puts the noodles back in the pan and pours the sauce over it, stirs it.

It's finished in a couple of minutes, and the two of them just stare at it. He's pretty sure neither of them are hungry.

"Do you love him?" Billy asks.

Max's mouth falls open. She gapes at him. "Wh-what?"

"Lucas. Do you love him?"

"That's not any of your business."

"I missed a day of work to pick you up from the airport. It feels like it is my business."

"Well, it's *not*," she says, stomping away from him. He sees the anger for what it is-- a mask to hide her retreat out of fear of the question.

He knows that fear. He's been feeling it climbing up his spine since the day Steve came back into his life. He remembers it sinking in its teeth in when he pressed Steve against the wall at the Byers' house and kissed him like it was the only thing he had left in his body to do. How it had felt so warm and then so cold, and he'd known that as much as he wanted it, as much as his entire body ached and pleaded for it, he didn't deserve it.

Coward .

He thinks of Hopper in his office, staring up at him without an ounce of fear on his face. *"I'm not a coward. I've just got too much to lose."*

...and he remembers his own words, a desperate cry for validation. *"What if you're both just being stupid assholes and you've wasted so much fucking time? What if... it's not about whether you deserve her?"*

Hopper had given him that validation too, and he'd squandered it. He'd pushed Steve away because he did have so much to lose, but he was also a fucking coward, he'd always been a fucking coward, Steve and these kids had faced literal fucking monsters and Billy couldn't even face his own goddamn *feelings* --

"Max," Billy says, and his voice breaks in the middle, and she's turning back from the doorway, pale and wide-eyed, and he's *exposed* , so *exposed* ...

"Wh... what...?" Max asks softly, as if any louder of a voice will bring the house down.

"Do you love him?" Billy asks, and it's not what he wants to say.

She swallows, arms folding protectively around herself. She still doesn't answer.

"Max, for fuck's sake, you've been doing this dance with him for ten fucking years. Do you love him or don't you?"

"Billy, are you ok--"

"Answer the fucking question, Maxine!"

She jolts but doesn't run. She holds her head high on her neck. She's so tall now. She's not a kid anymore. She's tall, and strong, and brave. "It doesn't matter," she says, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"Yes, it does. That's all that matters."

"What the fuck do you even know about love, huh?!" It explodes out of her so suddenly that Billy's not even sure what to do with it other than let it hit him. "You don't know a goddamn thing about love, or about me and Lucas! You don't know how-- how fucking *good* he is to me, and how I take advantage of him! How I start all the fights and how I always walk out when I don't get my way, even when I don't *want* my way! You don't know how he always finds me, how he always knows where I'm gonna go, and he always says he's sorry, even though he didn't do anything wrong! He didn't *do anything wrong*, Billy! I'm what's wrong! *I'm what's wrong* !

"I-- I can't... I can't love him the way he should be loved," she sobs, the flames of her anger drenched by the emotion it tried to smother. "I can't because-- because I know how it's gonna turn out. I've seen how it goes. It all falls apart in the end. I saw it with my mom and dad. I watched my mom try so hard to make my dad happy, and all he did was ignore her, and then he cheated on her, divorced her, and *married the woman he cheated on her with* ... and Mom, *God* ... she gets hitched to the first asshole who gives her a smidgen of attention, and she fucking turns a blind eye to the fact that he beats the hell out of his son! Why? Because she would rather have that illusion of happiness than see fucking *reality* ! But I *see it* ! I can't pretend that I don't! I am-- I am a *product* of these two people! That's what I fucking am!"

She sinks to the floor, her back against the doorframe. Her shoulders still quake with sobs. Billy keeps standing there, watching, *aching* .

"The way... he holds me," she says, laughing wetly at the absurdity of it, "is like I'm... amazing. He holds me, and I feel like I can take on the whole goddamn world. He holds me, and I think I don't have to be what's laid out before me. I can be whatever I want... but I woke up this morning, and he's gone to work, and I'm laying there in an apartment that I did nothing to pay for. I'm laying there in bedsheets he bought, in a t-shirt that smells like him, realizing I've decided to

chase some stupid pipe dream all because he believes in me... I don't... I don't deserve it. I don't deserve him."

She sniffs, rubbing uselessly at her eyes.

Billy doesn't remember crossing the room. He's just suddenly there, slumping down into the opposite side of the doorway, watching as she fumbles with her lighter, trying to light the cigarette she's put between her lips. He thinks about her statement, being a product of her parents. He thinks a lot of himself is here too, whether she'd admit to it or not.

"It's not about whether you deserve him," Billy says, reaching out and taking the lighter, using his steady hand to light it for her. "It's about whether you love him. So do you? Or don't you?"

She takes a long, shaky drag, lets the smoke plume from her mouth. It seems to calm her a bit. "I do," she says, staring at the floor. "I love him for the way he makes me feel... for his... stupid laugh, and his collection of action figures, and... and the stupid way he quirks his mouth up when he's got a surprise, and it's so fucking obvious I know it's going to happen before he reveals it, but I don't even have to act surprised because... because it's always a surprise. It's always something unexpected. The pride he feels when he makes me happy is so... unexpected." She laughs again, tears dripping off of the end of her chin. "It's so *stupid*."

Billy doesn't know what to say. There's a million things. She's said so much, and this is the point when he's sure he should offer some brotherly advice for once in his fucking life, but he's had no practice, and he has no idea where to start.

So, he says, "I'm in love with Steve."

Well, at least it got her to stop crying. He's going to consider that a win.

"What?" she asks, but before he can say anything, there's a knock on the door.

Billy gets up and pretends his legs aren't wobbly from the confession

he just made and goes to answer.

It's Lucas.

He looks as unslept as Max does, rental car still rumbling in the driveway. He's tall and gangly and young, but Billy thinks maybe he's not all that young and that Billy's just getting old. He still looks at Billy with a scabbed-over sort of fear, one that Billy could pick at if he wanted to get back under the skin, but he doesn't.

"Hey," Billy says, tilting his chin up.

"I'm--"

"Looking for Max?" Billy asks.

"Y... yeah."

"You flew all the way here looking for her. What makes you think she's here?"

"My credit card company called about some suspicious charges," Lucas says, the old bruise of his fear fading under sardonic attitude that feels more like his actual personality. "A uh... plane ticket to Indiana. I bailed out on work and caught the next flight out. I figured she'd be here because, I mean, this is her place, and Dustin would've told me."

"Considering how quick you hopped on a plane, doesn't seem like you gave Dustin time to tell you squat."

"I knew she would be here," Lucas amends. "I just... know her."

"Uh-huh..."

"Look, I- if she doesn't wanna talk, that's fine. I get it. I mean, I dunno what I did, but it's fine. Just... tell me she's okay?"

Billy looks back over his shoulder at Max who is staring saucer-eyed over hearing Lucas's voice or Billy's previous confession (or both), and he thinks that he could lie. He thinks that's even what she probably wants him to do.

...but since when has he ever done what Max wanted?

“Not really,” Billy says. “I mean, if she came to *me* you gotta know she’s feeling pretty fucked up, but... if it helps, it’s got nothing to do with you and everything to do with the dysfunctional shit life America’s favorite past time of divorce did. You want some spaghetti?”

Lucas looks out at the street, almost as if he’s got to make sure the offer isn’t directed at someone else. Even when he turns back he still doesn’t seem entirely convinced.

“Go turn your car off and come in,” Billy says and shuts the door in his face.

“What the fuck, Billy?” Max whisper-shouts. He’s still not sure if it’s because of Lucas or because of what he told her.

“There’s enough spaghetti for three people,” he says, making a beeline for the stove and scooping it onto plates.

“That’s not--” she starts, but the front door shuts and a moment later Lucas is in the kitchen too, watching Max with both hesitancy and adoration. She goes silent and still, looking back at him like he’s the only person in the room, in the state, in the country, in the world.

“Hey, Mad Max,” he says, awkward.

“Hey, Stalker,” she says, equally awkward.

Billy shoves a plate into each of their hands and gets a six pack out of the fridge. He sets the beers down with a little more noise than necessary, then gestures unceremoniously at the table. “Sit. Eat.”

They do sit. Billy does too, with his own plate. The spaghetti isn’t very good, but it’s better than the silence stretching out between the three of them.

Max is the first to speak up, and it’s only when the plates are mostly clear.

“Why did you come here, Lucas?”

Lucas answers with a shrug, like booking an expensive plane ticket to follow his girlfriend part of the way across the country isn't a big deal.

"I would've come back. I just needed some space," she says, and Billy sees it again. He sees her leaning on the anger because it's safe.

"That's fine," Lucas says. "I'll go see my parents, and when you're ready to go back home, you can call me, and we'll go back together."

"You-- you should be pissed off at me," Max says. "I stole from you and bailed out of town. Why aren't you *pissed*?"

"I am pissed," Lucas says, airy, casual, like he's talking about the weather. "It's not you I'm pissed at though."

"And why not?"

Max is trying to get a rise out of him, and he can see her frustration over the fact that it's not working at all.

"Because I made you feel like you had to run," Lucas says, "So, I'm sorry."

The anger drains out of Max, but the desperation stays. "Sorry? *Sorry*? You didn't do anything wrong. You didn't make me feel like that, fucking *life* made me feel like that."

Billy really wishes he isn't sitting here for this. He's not a good mediator. He just kind of wishes Max would tell Lucas what she'd told him and cut the bullshit. He knows, ultimately, he could tell him himself, announce it to the table like he's king of this goddamn castle, but...

He's never been king.

And he's always been a coward.

So he doesn't say anything.

"I ran because," Max says, "it's not fair for you to keep holding me in the air each time I go leaping for the cliffs. It's not fair that... that

when we're together, *you're* the one who gets dirty looks. That all your friends at work think I just like you for your money. No one thinks I'm good for you, but you don't give up on me and I don't know *why* . I'm not *worth it* .”

...and as simple as anything, not even looking up from his plate, Lucas says, “To me, you are.”

Billy thinks of Steve, fighting monsters, even only in his head, to protect Hannah, to protect Katie. He thinks of Steve's hand in his hair, of him saying *It's okay, it's okay* . He thinks of how Steve has seen Billy's darkness, witnessed it firsthand, and instead of cozying up in the normal life he could have had, he's decided to mingle with that darkness. Find comfort in it. Safety in it.

He thinks of Steve seeing beyond who he was, seeing who he is . It's not something even Billy's been able to see for a long time.

He thinks of Steve staring out his window at Billy in his car.

He thinks of how Katie says *he's sad all the time. Like you* .

He thinks of how Steve always lets him run. How he always knows where to find him because it's always between the palms of his hands when he says *it's okay. It's okay*.

He stands, the chair scraping against the floor. “You two sort this shit out on your own. I'll be back later.”

He's got to pick up Katie from Steve's.

This time they're going to fucking *talk* .

He's so tired of running.

He's so tired of being scared.

Author's Note:

i'm on [tumblr](#).